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Unit-1: Educational Thoughts of Srimanta Sankardev

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Brief Life Sketch and Philosophy of life:

Srimanta Sankardev was a 15th–16th century Assamese polymath: a saint-scholar, poet, playwright, dancer, actor, musician, artist social-religious reformer and a figure of importance in the cultural and religious history of Assam, India. He was born at Alipukhuri near Bordowa of present Nagaon district of Assam in the year 1449. Sankardev was the son of Kusumbar Bhuyan and Satyasandhya. His mother Satyasandha died on the 15th day of his birth and his father died when he was about 6-7 years old. As Sankardev lost his parents at an early age, he was raised by his grandmother Khersuti. He attended tol (school) of Mahendra Kandali. Within a short span of time, of six or seven years, he came out as an acknowledged scholar in various branches of learning .i.e, the Vedas, the Upanisadas, the Purānas, the Rāmāyana, the Mahābhārata and other Kāvya, Grammar, Philosophy and the Tantras which formed the usual course of studies. Śankaradeva showed signs of his poetic genius in his school days. He wrote his first verses Kartala Kamala, even without formal education on all the vowels. He studied grammar and Indian scriptures at the tol. Sankardev wrote his first work – Harish Chandra Upakhyan, during his days at the Mahendra Kandali's tol.

Sankardeva was physically strong and there is a legend that he could swim across flooded Brahmaputra, one of the largest rivers in the world. He left the tol in his late teen years. Then he started to attend his responsibilities as the Shiromani Bhuyan. Later Sankardev moved to Bordowa and married his first wife Suryavati.

Coming from a well to do land owning kayastha family, Śankaradeva acquired a thorough knowledge of the traditional 33 learnings and after the death of his wife he decided to devote himself to the upliftment of religious, moral and social life of the people, majority of

whom at that period steeped in ignorance, superstition and elaborate ritualism in the name of religious practices. He fought relentlessly against casteism, injustice, exploitation of man against man and stood for social equality, dignity of man and universal brotherhood. He considered 'Bhakti' as the only way of salvation. Mukti occupies a secondary place in his thinking. Love towards God was the supreme theme of his belief. Sankardeva made a 12 years long pilgrimage to different holy places like Puri, Gaya, Vrindavana, Mathura, Haridwar, Prayag, Rameswaram, Dwaraka, Badarikashrama, Jaganath etc. The long and extensive pilgrimage gave him the opportunity to exchange his views with other saints and preachers of neo-vaishnavite movement of that period from different places of India. He observed the over-whelming social and religious changes brought about by bhakti movement of that period and their impact on the minds of the Indian masses. He however did not renounce the world and returned home. The prolonged sojourn discussion on religious matters with some saints and his deep study of the Sanskrit scriptures he found in the above holy places profoundly influenced his life to the extent of enlightenment.

Sankardev once again left for a pilgrimage in 1550 with a large party of 117 disciples that included Madhavdev, Ramrai, Ramaram, Thakur Ata and others. Thakur Ata had to return after just one day's journey. Madhavdev had to take entire responsibility of logistics. He on the request of Sankardev's wife Kalindi urged him to return from Puri and not proceed to Vrindavana. Sankardev and the group returned to Patbausi within six months in 1551.

Srimanta Sankardev preached a unique philosophy. His teachings were in the line of Upanishadic philosophy of enlightenment by knowledge of the self, together with pure devotion to the supreme God as preached in Bhâgavata. He made a fine blending of the two. There are elements of monism, dualism, qualified monism, dualistic non dualism and so many other branches of Hindu philosophy in his teachings. In fact, he carried the entire spectrum of Hinduism in his teachings. But he corroborated his teachings so logically that it came to form a whole new school, which can be termed Vivartanavada in our view. It was a marvellous presentation of the entire range of spiritual inclinations of a person. A devotee could thus evolve through it from the gross to the subtle, from mundane to spiritual and from man to God.

The literary work of Sankardev extends from Bhagabat to Gunamala. He created many dramas known as Ankia Naat. Sankardev is the creator of Sattriya Dance, one of the classic dance forms of India.

After living a long, eventful life that shaped Assamese culture and Vaishnavism, Srimanta Sankardev passed away in the year 1568. The cause of his death was said to be a bish puhora (painful boil). He was 120 years old at the time of his death.

Educational Philosophy of Srimanta Sankardev:

Education through Satras: With the rise of the Sankaradeva Movement, the responsibility of imparting education came under its domain. The Satra institution voluntarily took upon itself the noble responsibility of enlightening the people through their own tols. All the important Satras used to maintain a regular band of scholars whose duty it was to impart education, especially in respect of ancient lore and scriptures. Along with the Vaisnavite texts and the Vedic and Puranic lore, the other branches of study such as Vyakarana, Nyaya and Kavyas were also taken up for study and were not neglected.

The Satras imparted both formal and informal education. It imparted formal education through the tols and catuspathis maintained by some of the affluent Satras and informal education which was more effective than the former in the case of the masses, consisted of sermons, exposition of scriptures and discussions on philosophical and theological matters during the prayer services. Further, the monks were given written exercises not only in copying out manuscripts and illuminating them with relevant pictures, but also in translating Sanskrit scriptures and composing original works in Assamese. After years of education and rigorous training in Vaisnava faith and discipline, these monks were deputed to various parts of the province for the purpose of preaching and propagating their faith. In course of time, many of these monks established new Satras at different places, and this network of institutions helped the diffusion of education, learning and culture in the entire country. In this way, the Satras produced successful teachers and missionaries as well as eminent philosophers, scholars and poets.

The Satras as a Library: Like the Christian monastery of the medieval times, a Satra was not only a religious centre but also a school and a library. Every Satra possessed a library consisting of manuscripts to the extent of a few thousand copies. Not only were the existing books preserved with utmost care, but books were also imported from other parts of India. Big Satras like Āuniāti and Daksinpāt once contained more than a thousand manuscripts, some of which are now being preserved by the different antiquarian institutions. It is not that only religious

scriptures were preserved, but books on music and dance, medicine, literature, philosophy and even painting were carefully preserved. Some rare Sanskrit manuscripts like the Srihastamuktāvali, Sātvata-tantra, Hastividyārnava have been recovered from the Satra libraries of Assam. The books that were preserved were not left to lie fallow. They were industriously and assiduously copied and worn-out ones were replaced by new copies. A set of persons were specially entrusted by the affluent Satras to do the necessary work of preparing manuscripts. The copying of manuscripts was considered to be a meritorious deed.

Education through literature, music, dance and drama:

1. **Poetic Work:** Through simple and colloquial language, poetic work of Srimanta Sankardeva can be recognized as a fit strong vehicle for the dissemination of Bhakti among the students. It helps to purify the state of mind of the students by eliminating negative thoughts and feeling. The reflection of spiritual significance based on the life and exploits of Lord Krishna through the poetry of Sankardev promote strong moral character formation of students. Sankardev's poetic work can be considered as a very rich source of aesthetic development of the students.
2. **Bhakti Theory:** The major educational significant can be seen from Bhakti theory of Sankardeva is that through the religious principle, Sankardeva tried to establish a classless society by removing untouchability and intolerance. Besides, Bhakti theory also emphasis on imparting democratic value like brotherhood, unity, equality and adopting right value like love, affection, peace etc. among the people which is most important relevancy in present world.
3. **Drama:** Major educational significant of the drama of Srimanta Sankardeva is that these are the great instrument of informal education to impart spiritual, cultural and moral education to the common people especially illiterate people of Assam.
4. **Song:** Borgeet has deep contribution to attain liberal aim of education in Indian educational system. With the in-depth realization of the feelings of devotion, the philosophy behind the Borgeet of Srimanta Sankardeva empowers individuals with broad knowledge, a strong sense of value, ethics and civic engagement.
5. **Sattriya Dance:** This dance form vibrates the body and mind. It is a form of yoga. To learn Sattriya dance, a learner have to survive a difficult period of time of hard training

from which a learner can learn discipline and patience which two factor most important in human life. The total body movement of a dancer so that a child has his or her complete physical fitness and get control over the body. It is a dance form which depends on the mode of expression of the inner feeling of the dancer. So, it can enhance the self-belief and selfconfidence. This type of dance based on the mythology and puranas. So, when a student learns this dance, he or she is bound to know the story of Mahabharata, Ramayana, Bhagawat. In this way, a student can be motivated to learn the Indian ancient literature. This dance has deep significant to promote the greatest Indian cultural heritage among students.

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